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The
Green Tree

By

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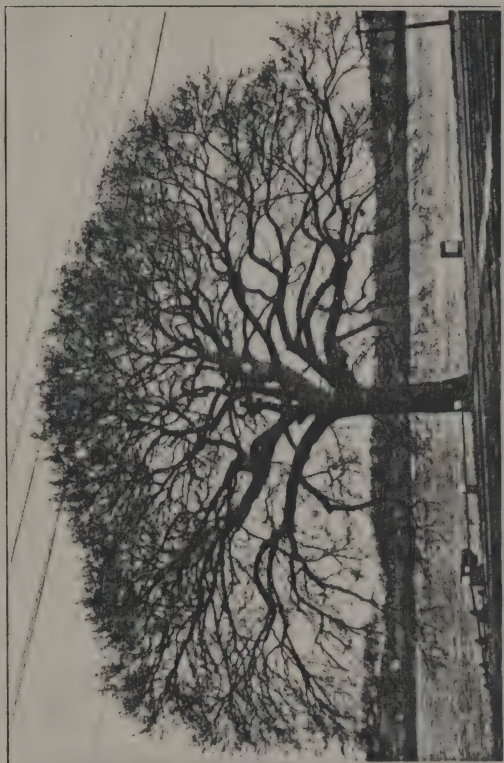
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The Green Tree



THE GREEN TREE IN SPRING

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*Reprinted, with revisions, from "American Forests
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of the American Forestry Association.*

To my friend of Paradise Hill,
Col. J. D. Barnes

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The Green Tree

I

NOBLEST among the tree celebrities of the upper Mississippi valley is the famous elm claimed by the old river town of Le Claire, Iowa. From considerations of size, beauty, and historic association this is a tree of exceptional interest and personality. It was eminently fitting that in 1912 it should be elected to a place in the "Hall of Fame for Trees" at Washington.

"The Le Claire Elm" is the name by which this tree has become known far and wide throughout the Mississippi Valley, but to the residents of the village and the surrounding countryside it is known as "The Green Tree." Back of

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this somewhat enigmatic name lies a fascinating story.

In the antebellum river days, the days immortalized by Mark Twain in *Life on the Mississippi*, the village of Le Claire was an important river port because of the strategic position which it occupied at the head of the Upper, or Rock Island, Rapids. Steamboats and rafts plying the upper Mississippi were compelled to stop here before starting across the rapids or after having passed them. Thus Le Claire became a great river town. "When the river business was at its high tide mark," says a historian of those early days, "Le Claire could boast without fear of contradiction of furnishing more pilots and engineers than any other town or city on the Mississippi."

A few rods upstream from the Le Claire landing place there stood by the water's edge a shapely elm

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whose branches overarched a large plot of sloping ground. This naturally became a rendezvous for river men from far and near who, often penniless, came to Le Claire looking for jobs as river hands, or to catch a ride up or down the river (in many cases it mattered little which). Under the grateful shade of the elm they congregated, spread their blankets, and cooked their meals, often making this spot their home for weeks at a time. With characteristic Yankee humor they dubbed this inexpensive open-air lodging house "The Green Tree Hotel," and by this name it came to be known among the river men from St. Paul to New Orleans.

The scene has changed. Now the river is silent and deserted compared to what it was in those hey-days of steamboat traffic. It has been so for soon half a century. The rough and picturesque river

THE GREEN TREE

men no longer crowd the wharves or gather in the shade of the elm to cook, sleep, or swap river yarns and river gossip while waiting for their ships to come in. They are a vanished generation. But the grand old tree still stands, grown patriarchal with the passing years, and its local name, The Green Tree, perpetuates the faded glory of the all but forgotten days of the '40's and '50's.

II

IN THE EARLY DAYS the Father of Waters lapped against the very foot of The Green Tree.

The town youngsters—the Tom Sawyers and Huck Finns of this community—frequently met under the elm, played games, and doubtless concocted much mischief. Perched on the roots of the tree they could dangle their bare feet idly in the current and wriggle their toes in the sand.

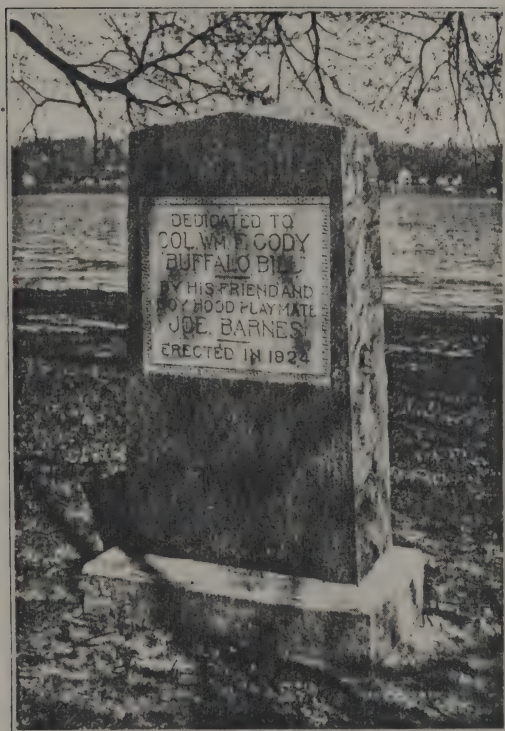
One day in the summer of 1852 a new boy ventured into the circle, a stranger belonging to the family just moved down from a farm located a few miles back on the prairies and now living in the frame house “up the road a piece.” Upon invitation the newcomer stripped and, leaving his clothes under The

THE GREEN TREE

Green Tree, joined his future comrades in a swim.

A few minutes later, from the direction of the shore came derisive yells of "Chaw beef!" Breathes there a boy with soul so dead that he doesn't instinctively feel the urge of battle at the call of "Chaw beef"? Well—the newcomer did chaw beef, of course, but when the knots in his sleeves and shirt tails were all solved, he unhesitatingly set himself to the task in hand, and because he was tall, sturdy, and a born scrapper he soundly thrashed the ringleader of his tormentors. So the stranger won for himself a place of honor in that pioneer community.

Today there stands a granite monument under The Green Tree dedicating the elm to the memory of the newcomer of that far-away day. It was erected by another of the youngsters then present, a little



THE MONUMENT

THE GREEN TREE

fellow who went by the nickname
“The Runt” and who with the rest
had lustily shouted “Chaw beef!”
The inscription on the granite slab
will tell the rest of the story—

Dedicated to
Col. Wm. F. Cody
“Buffalo Bill”
By his friend and
boyhood playmate
Joe Barnes
Erected in 1924

Of the house near Le Claire in
which William Cody was born, not
a vestige remains today. It was
located a couple of miles inland
from the elm. It is to be hoped
that at some not distant day a
marker will be placed to indicate
the spot where the house stood.
The frame house “up the road a
piece” in which Cody spent part
of his boyhood days still stands,
and the new hard road passes with-

THE GREEN TREE

in a few yards of its aged and rickety threshold. The country roundabout is rich in associations of the Cody family—but that is another story.*

* "The Codys in Le Claire." *Annals of Iowa*, July, 1929, pages 1-11.



THE OLD CODY HOME AT "PARKHURST TOWN," NOW A PART OF LE CLAIRE, BUILT IN 1840 BY ISAAC CODY, THE FATHER OF COL. W. F. CODY

III

THE GREEN TREE, so the story goes, was early undermined by the cutting of the river about its roots and it would certainly have toppled into the Mississippi at last (as several of its neighbors actually did, and as was the fate of the original Le Claire river road) had not Providence intervened and saved it from a watery grave. The instrument of Providence in this particular incident, which occurred at the time of the Civil War, was a local contractor by name of Joe Perkins.

It appears that the villagers decided to improve their boat landing, and the said Joe Perkins contracted to fill in the shallow water under The Green Tree. For this purpose limestone blocks were quarried from

THE GREEN TREE

the bluff a couple of hundred feet distant and conveyed to the water's edge through a tunnel under the rock (the quarry, tunnel, and rock filling may be seen today, practically unchanged by the sixty odd years that have since elapsed).

When the job was finished The Green Tree was left standing high and dry above the Mississippi and separated from the river by a massive rock bulwark some thirty or forty feet wide. The incessant gnawing of the hungry river at the roots of the tree was stopped. Whether Joe Perkins realized that generations unborn would call him blessed for saving The Green Tree, or whether he was concerned wholly with the uninspired task of building a new boat landing we know not, nor does it matter. The tree was saved, and to Joe Perkins the credit is due.

THE GREEN TREE

Ever since this civic improvement was made, the steamboats have landed in front of the old elm instead of some rods downstream from it as in pre-Civil War days. Not infrequently government boats may still be seen during summer months, docked at this point. In what a kindly and confiding manner does not the patriarchal tree seem to incline toward the boats whose companionship it has so long enjoyed, and with whose history its own is so inseparably linked! This tree has not only witnessed the vicissitudes of river life; it has played an active role in them.

The tradition has received currency in Le Claire that in 1863, when the United States military authorities transported the Sioux prisoners down the Mississippi from Minnesota by steamboat, a stop was made at Le Claire, which time the squaws utilized by suspending

THE GREEN TREE

their papoose cradles from the branches of The Green Tree, where the wind could swing them. A pretty story which one would like to accept as true, but when it was referred to Joe Barnes, the village historian, that sage vigorously shook his head and said, "That never happened; the Sioux prisoners were landed at Camp McClelland, above Davenport." Then, with a twinkle, came the admonition with which Joe Barnes loves to rebuke zealous but not overly discriminating newspaper men: "Let matters of history be kept straight!"

IV

ONCE AGAIN, this time in its maturity, The Green Tree was threatened. And again Providence intervened.

In 1899 Le Claire found a place on a new railroad, the Davenport, Rock Island, and Northwestern, being constructed along the Mississippi River from Davenport, Iowa, northward. When the new route was surveyed, the line marked out by the surveyors cut directly through The Green Tree. Which was to give way, the tracks or the tree? "The tree," at first insisted the railroad officials. "Not so!" retorted the village council, aroused to the defense of its illustrious tree-citizen; and the franchise finally granted Frank P. Blair, the promoter, allowing the railroad to run

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its tracks through the town was conditional, bearing this proviso: Spare The Green Tree, or—no tracks. And the tree was spared. A part of the line was resurveyed, so that the tracks might run to the north of the tree; and the council was further guaranteed that “not a single bough of the old tree should ever be molested so long as a single root or branch remained alive.”

Ever since, the railroad company (on whose right of way the tree stands) has been properly appreciative of its noble charge and active in caring for it. It was the railroad company that years ago caused a stout palisade to be built around the tree. The station itself stands just next to the palisade, in the very shadow of the elm.

As the northbound trains start up after their brief stop at Le Claire, passengers sitting on the river side catch a fleeting glimpse of the huge

THE GREEN TREE

trunk, gnarled limbs, and grandly spreading top of The Green Tree. The finely divided extremities almost overtop the passing cars. A fleeting impression it necessarily is, but one that must long linger in the memory of anyone possessing appreciation for the noble and beautiful in trees.

The ground enclosed in the palisade is a village park. Punched clam shells have been hauled here from local button factories and scattered profusely around the tree trunk and along the walks leading to it. The perforated shells furnish tourists with interesting and appropriate souvenirs of the tree and the old town.

The local post of the G. A. R. (the John R. Buckman) donated an old Civil War field piece "with the understanding that it remain the property of the town and be planted beneath the branches of

THE GREEN TREE

the old tree on the bank of the river, there to remain until they cease to be green." Here it now stands, within the palisade, and there is delightful though unintentional humor in the fact that the cannon is pointed in the general direction of Port Byron, a rival town on the Illinois side of the river.

Recently a reunion of Le Claire pioneers—the "Le Claire exiles" they decided to call themselves—chose the space under the elm as the spot most suitable for their gatherings. The famous elm is the outstanding attraction of Le Claire, and the village is justly proud of it. A Le Claire patriarch has written that "the inhabitants of Le Claire love the old elm tree with a devotion amounting almost to filial affection, and there is nothing however great or important that would cause them to sacrifice it."



UPON WHOSE BOSOM SNOW HAS LAIN

V

LE CLAIRE is built along the west side of the Mississippi, on the inner curve of a great bend at which the river swings sharply westward. Here the limestone bluffs close in on the Father of Waters to form that lovely portion of the valley often referred to as "The Narrows." Immediately below the village, the Mississippi starts westward through a broadening valley on its twelve-mile race over the upper of the only two rapids that seriously disturb its calm in a two thousand mile course—from the Twin Cities to the Gulf of Mexico.

It is about the stretch of river below Le Claire that Mark Twain writes reminiscently in *Life on the Mississippi*:

"And I remember Muscatine . . .
 . . for its summer sunsets. I have

THE GREEN TREE

never seen any, on either side of the ocean, that equaled them. They used the broad, smooth river as a canvas, and painted on it every imaginable dream of color, from the settled daintinesses and delicacies of the opal, all the way up, through cumulative intensities, to blinding purple and crimson conflagrations, which were enchanting to the eye, but sharply tried it at the same time. All the upper Mississippi region has these extraordinary sunsets as a familiar spectacle. It is the true Sunset Land; I am sure no other country can show so good a right to the name."

But the humorist must, of course, have the last word: "The sunrises are also said to be exceedingly fine. I do not know."

Le Claire is perhaps the most attractive of the many little old river towns which in by-corners of the upper valley sleep through the

THE GREEN TREE

changing years, themselves little changed. The environment which it affords is not the least of the charms of The Green Tree.

Though not over a quarter of a mile wide the town straggles along more than two miles of curving river front. History offers the explanation for this situation. Originally there were two neighboring villages, Le Claire, founded in 1837 at the head of the rapids, and Parkhurst, or "Parkhurst Town" as it was commonly called, founded in 1834 about a mile and a half farther upstream. A stretch of dense forest known as "the Gulf" separated the two villages. Then the founding of a lumber mill in 1851 at the mouth of a creek flowing through the Gulf caused a third town, which fell heir to the name of Middletown, to spring up midway between the other two. The three settlements expanded and by

THE GREEN TREE

the middle '50's jostled elbows uncomfortably. Clearly a case of the survival of the fittest was involved, and Le Claire proved to be most fit by virtue of being the first town above the rapids. The inevitable happened and in 1855 Le Claire engulfed its upstream neighbors. Hence the present elongation of the village.

Thus augmented Le Claire became a bustling town which numbered 1,500 to 1,800 souls—three times the population which it can now muster. It was then one of the most important towns on the upper Mississippi. Mills and factories were in busy operation, not to mention the half-dozen saloons that are reported to have been well patronized. But there came the financial crash of '57 which visited Le Claire as impartially as it did the hundreds of sister villages throughout the country. The mills

THE GREEN TREE

and the factories closed down, though the saloons did not, and for a time the only individuals who flourished were the small boys who were hired to ring the auction bells which sounded through the unhappy town.

Le Claire never fully recovered its early vitality. It is true that the river business flourished for many years yet, but after 1885 even that waned. The stone quarries in the hills and clam fisheries in the river seem to have kept the spark of life aglow but never to have fanned it into flame.

A village of frame houses becomes shabby and unsightly with age, but one of stone and brick simply develops personality. The Le Claire business houses, many built of weathered Niagara limestone from the near-by quarries (now abandoned and ivy-grown) look old and are so. There is an

THE GREEN TREE

appealing touch of old-worldliness in the rude slab walks and yellow stone walls which, following closely the bends of the river or mounting the abrupt bluffs, have here and there somehow persisted into this age of prosaic cement and concrete.

Across the broad river rise the roofs and steeples of Port Byron, a sister city equally old and almost equally quaint.

Here is a picturesque bit of the great valley, charming in its gentle peace and lingering suggestion of the long ago.

VI

AND A PICTURE of the Green Tree itself, placed in this attractive setting. It stands in the heart of the village, about forty feet from the water's edge. The massive, well-turned bole, four feet in diameter, springs unbutressed from the ground and rises with scarcely perceptible taper to a height of twenty feet, where it bursts into that magnificent crown which, once seen, is not to be forgotten.

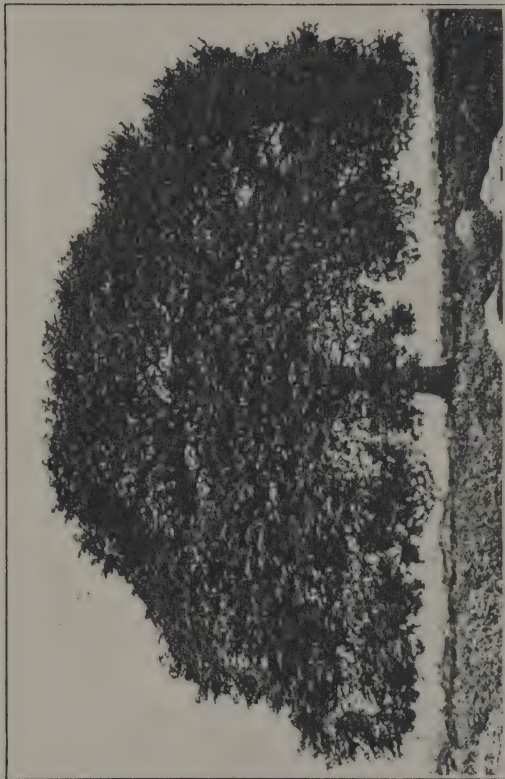
Rarely, if ever, may one find a nobler example of intricate and majestic branching than that afforded by this lordly old elm. The huge lower limbs are thrust far out horizontally, and at their extremities almost sweep the ground. The others are tossed skyward, but be-

THE GREEN TREE

cause they are shorter, the crown of the tree is given an oval shape, being more than twice as broad as high. Though the total height of the tree is not much in excess of fifty feet, the crown canopies an area measuring over one hundred feet north and south and eighty feet east and west.

All of the limbs are grandly twisted and contorted, yet in their ensemble they give the crown a symmetry that is irreproachable. This marvelous symmetry and beauty of branching can best be appreciated if the tree be studied in late winter, when not a leaf remains to obscure the exquisite tracery, and every tortuous limb may be followed from its thick knotted base to its countless tips. To me The Green Tree has always seemed most appealing so, when displayed in the stark bareness of winter, but others prefer it in summer, when

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"IN VERDURE CLAD"

APPENDIX



THE GREEN TREE

the foliage is so dense that the magnificent framework which supports it is quite lost to view.

The Green Tree is redeemed from the flaw of painful perfection in that it leans pronouncedly toward the river. Perhaps this inclination is lightward, perhaps it is the result of the settling of the river banks, long ago. Whatever the cause, it serves rather to heighten the individuality of the tree than to detract from it.

It has pleased me to fancy that when The Green Tree was yet but a slender sapling on the banks of the Mississippi, it was singled out to be henceforth the object of special dispensations, that some day it might be displayed as the very exemplification of tree nobility. Does it not seem so? How The Green Tree was rescued from the river and from the railroad has al-

THE GREEN TREE

ready been told, but that is not all the story:

The Green Tree has never been torn by lightning or rent by storm, and the "globe" character of its crown makes the splitting off of limbs extremely improbable in the future. Thus it is spared the greatest menace which ordinarily threatens the elm.

Its roots are sunk in beds perennially saturated from the river; hence The Green Tree has never experienced drought, and never will.

Nor has the tree been denied its full measure of the life-bestowing sunlight, for to the east, northeast, and southeast stretches only the broad expanse of the Mississippi.

The full, rounded contour of the crown of The Green Tree testifies that at least for many decades no crowding neighbors have contested its ground. Now the elm


THE GREEN TREE

stands quite alone, and it is the more majestic and imposing for being so.

Though campfires have doubtless often been kindled beneath The Green Tree since the early days when the Sacs and Foxes held this land against the claims of rival tribes, there is no evidence to indicate that any of them ever seriously marred its shapely trunk.

From these dispensations—and the list might be lengthened—is one not justified in concluding that here indeed is a veritable “Nature’s darling”?

VII

 HIS ACCOUNT would be incomplete without a closing reference to the man whose name must ever be associated with The Green Tree, who for almost ninety years has lived within the benign influence of the historic elm and who has, indeed, grown old with it—Col. J. D. Barnes.

Col. Barnes, or just “Joe Barnes” as he prefers to be called, is a Civil War veteran, the final and undisputed authority to whom are referred questions relating to the early history of this portion of the valley, and a rare personality, like The Green Tree, worth coming many a mile to meet. In his eighty-ninth year at the time of this writing, he retains to a happy degree the alertness of youth, and is still



JOE BARNES AND THE GREEN TREE

THE GREEN TREE

the ever-watchful guardian of The Green Tree, as he has been for so many decades.

Of all Le Claire's interested villagers, Joe Barnes has learned to know and love The Green Tree most intimately. And it is as though in this secluded corner of the Mississippi Valley the beautiful story of *The Great Stone Face* has been lived again, for The Green Tree seems to have imparted some of its benignity and grace upon the man who through a lifetime has been devoted to it, as did The Great Stone Face upon the simple Ernst. And so it has come about that no other man has won as universal affection throughout the community as has Joe Barnes.

To stroll through Le Claire with Col. Barnes, its historian, is to review the pageant of an eventful century as it was enacted along the Mississippi River—from the epoch-

THE GREEN TREE

al coming of the first white settlers and the breaking of the virgin prairie sod, through decades which witnessed the reign of successive river dynasties and the rise and fall of many ephemeral river industries, leading at last to the orderly present, whose sleepy monotony knows few more exciting interruptions than the periodic arrival and departure of the trains and ferry.

So let those who journey to Le Claire to see The Green Tree also pause for a few moments at the threshold of the old home on Paradise Hill, not far distant from the elm, where abides Le Claire's gentle philosopher and historian, friend o' trees and men, kindly Joe Barnes.*

* Col. Barnes passed away on July 2, 1931, after this manuscript had been placed in the hands of the publishers.

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